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Identifying and Alleviating Stress of Teacher Candidates in a Secondary Professional Development Schools (PDS) Program

Molly Mee

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Academic Leadership Journal

Teacher candidate stress is a significant issue for candidates, students, mentor teachers, and the Institute of Higher Education (IHE) representatives who work with the candidates. Stress during this important stage in a new teacher's career can be detrimental in many ways from causing early burnout (Greer & Greer, 1992; Schwab, 1989) to attrition (Brownell, 1997) and absenteeism. "It is during student teaching that preservice teachers begin to learn the habits of the profession and begin to develop adaptive or maladaptive coping skills for dealing with the stress of teaching" (Gold, 1985; Greer & Greer, 1992 as cited in Fives, Hamman, Olivarez, 2007, p. 918). Although the literature, especially within the past ten years, is scant there are scholars (Clement, 1999; Corcoran, 1989; Hemmings & Hockley, 2002; Hunter-Boykin & Thompson, 1993; Pigge & Marso, 1998; Schwab, 1989; Wadlington, Slaton & Partridge, 1998) who examined stress among teacher candidates during the field experience and find it to be a significant issue. There is agreement that stress levels are generally high during student teaching. In a seven-year study Pigge & Marso found that teacher candidate anxiety decreases as they progress through the teacher preparation program. This is further supported by Fives, Hamman & Olivarez who maintain that teacher candidates, who experience what the authors call high guidance as indicated by levels of support from the IHE, demonstrated lower levels of burnout at the end of their practicum than candidates with low guidance.

Not adequately represented in the literature, however, is what factors cause stress and what the IHE can do to address these factors to alleviate stress for teacher candidates. A thin layer of studies identifies common causes of stress for teacher candidates during the internship to include classroom management (Clement, 1999; Hunter-Boykin & Thompson; Smith, 2000), mentor teacher concerns (Corcoran, 1989; Schwab; 1989), university supervisor roles (Cole & Knowles, 1995), unrealistic expectations (Greer and Greer, 1992), getting a job (Clement), communication with the IHE representatives (White & LeCornu, 2002) and, personal and family issues (Enz, Kimerer & Freeman, 1997). Smith (2000) analyzed the research on problems experienced by teacher candidates and categorized them according to Fuller's model of teacher concerns. She identified five themes: discipline in classroom management, adjustments-personal and institutional, personal characteristics, teaching methods and strategies, working with special needs students.

A few scholars (Corcoran 1989; Hunter-Boykin & Thompson, 1993; Payne & Manning, 1990; Munday & Windham, 1995; Wadlington, Slaton & Partridge, 1998) took the research a step further and examined what needs to be integrated into the teacher education program to alleviate stress. Hunter-Boykin & Thompson discuss the importance of integrating more classroom management techniques for the candidates to model. The importance of email in opening lines of communication between candidates and IHE representatives is shown to be effective in alleviating stress by White and LeCornu. Wadlington, Slaton & Partridge provide a list of suggestions for the IHE ranging from reconfiguring observation schedules to use of dialogue journals. Clement (1999) provides a variety of suggestions from addressing stressors in on-campus seminars to more effective communication with mentor teachers and university supervisors. The use of self talk and internal dialogue to reduce negative emotions is advocated by Payne and Manning. Munday and Windham conducted a quantitative

investigation into the effects of stress management training on levels of anxiety of secondary teachers candidates and found there to be no significant impact in reducing levels of anxiety. Little research beyond these studies is found that lends insight into what the IHE can do to help teacher candidates with stress during the year-long program. Research specific to stress of PDS teacher candidates is negligible at best. Additional research is needed to examine the causes of stress of PDS teacher candidates in the year-long internship and ways the IHE can alleviate this stress.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to answer two primary research questions: (1) What are the major causes of stress among one cohort of secondary PDS teacher candidates as they enter and progress in the year-long internship? (2) What does one cohort of secondary PDS teacher candidates believe they need from the IHE to help alleviate stress? The results of the study add credence to existing literature by identifying causes of teacher candidate stress during the year-long internship and offering methods for addressing these causes in an effort to alleviate stress. If we want our teacher candidates to be successful in their teacher preparation programs and to positively impact classroom students then it is imperative that we take a closer look at what causes stress and what the IHE can do to alleviate this stress. The more we know about teacher candidate's perceptions of the causes of stress the more we can help them to be successful in the field.

Method

The study followed a qualitative case study design. The researcher's role was that of practitioner-researcher in that she was both the researcher and the IHE liaison. Limited to the phenomenon of stress from the perspective of one cohort the researcher bounded the case by time (one academic year) and size (one cohort of 12 candidates).

Sample and Setting

The cohort of 12 secondary PDS teacher candidates consisted of six males and six females. There were six social studies candidates, two mathematics candidates, and four English candidates. Eleven candidates were self identified as Caucasian and one was self identified as multiracial. Prior to the start of the second semester of the year-long program, one female English candidate was not permitted to continue in the program because she did not meet the required grade point average. At the beginning of the second semester of the year-long internship, one female Social Studies candidate left the program because of family reasons (she returned to another cohort the following semester). And finally, a male mathematics teacher was withdrawn from the program toward the end of the second semester of the year-long internship because of unsatisfactory performance. Data are included for all 12 candidates up until the point of leaving the program. All candidates were placed in a Professional Development Schools (PDS) site that consists of three partner schools – one high school and two middle schools. Each candidate worked at one of the two middle schools and at the high school. The schools are all located in a suburban area located about 20 miles outside of two large metropolitan cities. Each school has a diverse socioeconomic and ethnic population.

During the fall 2007 semester teacher candidates were assigned eight weeks to a middle school and eight weeks to a high school, and paired with a mentor teacher at each school. At this time, the candidates were enrolled in a secondary education course titled *Internship in Secondary Education*.

The class met at one of the PDS sites two mornings a week for 3-hour sessions. The IHE liaison, also the course instructor, met the candidates at the school for approximately one hour each session. The remaining two hours were spent working with the mentor teacher in the classroom. The course followed a core syllabus designed by secondary education faculty and was grounded in the INTASC principles. The teacher candidates took other courses concurrent with the fall internship including but not limited to a content methods course and other education and or content area courses.

During the spring 2008 semester teacher candidates enrolled in 12-credit hours of student teaching and took a 3-credit content area reading course. They assumed the role of a full-time teacher and spent eight weeks at each school. The content area reading course was held at one of the PDS middle schools. Approximately six student teaching seminar sessions were held with the IHE liaison during the spring semester. The purpose of the seminars was to address happenings in the field and to ensure that each candidate was making adequate progress and completing exit requirements. Each intern had a university supervisor who observed them a minimum of three times at each school site.

Data Collection

For triangulation or structural corroboration (Eisner, 1998) multiple data sources consisted of questionnaires, individual interviews, a focus group interview, and intern reflection journals collected from August 2007 through May 2008. The researcher administered a self-designed pre-internship questionnaire in August 2007 just prior to the beginning of the internship. She subsequently administered follow up questionnaires in October 2007, December 2007, and February 2008.

In addition to questionnaires, the researcher conducted individual interviews with three randomly selected teacher candidates during the spring 2008 semester and one focus group interview with the whole cohort at the end of the spring 2008 semester. The focus group interview allowed teacher candidates to “spark off one another, suggesting dimensions and nuances of the original problem that anyone individual might not have thought of” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 140).

Teacher candidate reflection journals served as another data set in which the candidates reflected on their internship experience. The IHE liaison provided prompts to which the candidates were asked to respond in one to two type-written pages. The journals provided additional insight into what the candidates were feeling and experiencing in relation to their classroom experiences.

Data Analysis

Following grounded theory analysis procedures (Creswell, 1998) the researcher used open coding to examine the data for categories or emergent themes of information in the data text. She used the constant comparative approach (Creswell) to look at data and continue to collect more data to support the categories. In addition, the researcher looked for properties or sub categories (Creswell) “representing multiple perspectives about the data” (p.151). Data analysis was iterative in that it began broadly and narrowed with each successive data collection method (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The analysis began early (Miles & Huberman, 1994) as data were collected allowing “the field-worker [to] cycle back and forth between thinking about the existing data and generating strategies for collecting new, often better, data” (p. 50). The researcher followed the same process to first categorize the causes of teacher candidate stress and then to identify ways the IHE can help alleviate the stress.

Findings and Discussion

This study sought to reveal causes of stress for secondary PDS teacher candidates during the year-long internship and ways the IHE can alleviate stress for the candidates. From analysis of the data the researcher found that teacher candidates experience stress during the internship and that this stress is caused by concern with (1) classroom management (2) mentor teachers (3) getting a job (4) knowledge of content and (5) the portfolio process. Within each category of concern the teacher candidates articulated commonalities labeled as properties or sub categories (Creswell) of each area of concern. The classroom management properties are viewing self as teacher and problems with no foreseeable solution. The mentor teacher properties are mentor pairings and finding one's role. Properties associated with getting a job are current financial concerns and the job seeking process. Properties associated with knowledge of content include knowing more than the students and the ability to translate the content through lesson plans. The portfolio process data did not yield separate properties. Additionally, during data analysis the researcher noticed thematic questions, rhetorical in nature, that captured the essence of candidate concerns. These questions naturally morphed into a who, what, where, why, how model. For instance, concerning classroom management the recurring thematic question *how can I possibly manage?* presented itself consistently in the data. Regarding mentor teacher concerns, candidates seemed to ask *who am I and who will my mentor be?* Concerning getting a job, candidates asked *where will this take me?* In regard to teacher candidate concern about knowledge of content they ask *what do I know?* Finally, data on the portfolio process seemed to ask *why must we do this?*

Teacher candidates were asked to offer ways that the IHE could help reduce their stress. Questionnaires, interviews, the focus group, and reflection journals were designed to seek candidate perceptions of what methods could be employed to reduce stress. Suggestions made by teacher candidates are (1) more classroom management training (2) meeting mentor teachers earlier in the program (3) more information about getting a job (4) more clarity of intern and mentor expectations. In the areas of content knowledge and portfolio candidates did not offer specific ways to reduce stress. Content knowledge was seen as an area of unavoidable stress where stress decreased as the candidates became more comfortable in the classroom. No specific suggestions were presented in the data. The portfolio was viewed as a necessary yet stressful exit requirement in the program. Other than the occasional request from candidates to eliminate the portfolio altogether no suggestions were made. It was noted by the candidates that the support (IHE liaison, PDS site coordinators, university supervisors, secondary education advisors) received from the IHE was exemplary and should be continued.

Table 1.

Causes, Questions, Properties, and Solutions to Stress

Cause	Thematic Question	Properties	Solution(s)
Classroom management	<i>How can I possibly manage?</i>	Viewing self as teacher Problems with no solution	More management training Clarification of candidate role
Mentor teachers	<i>Who is my mentor?</i> <i>Who am I?</i>	Earlier mentor pairings Finding one's role	Earlier pairings
Getting a job	<i>Where will this take me?</i>	Current financial concerns Job seeking process	More information earlier
Knowledge of content	<i>What do I know?</i>	Knowing more than the students Translating content through lesson plans	N/A
Portfolio process	<i>Why must we do this?</i>		N/A

Stressor #1 Classroom Management: "How can I possibly manage?"

All 12 teacher candidates noted that classroom management caused them considerable stress during their year-long internship. Questionnaire data indicated that concerns with classroom management were generally low early in the internship. Only six candidates noted classroom management as a cause of stress in the pre-internship questionnaire. As the candidates became more immersed in the classroom setting and had more interactions with students, classroom management emerged more frequently in the data as a cause of stress. Two properties of classroom management evident in the data are persistent management problems with no foreseeable solution and student versus teacher role confusion. The overarching question prevalent in the data is *how can I possibly manage this?*

Problems with no foreseeable solution. Candidates consistently expressed hopelessness and absence of possible solutions to the management problems they encountered. In the words of one candidate, "It seems that there are certain students or even classes that are always disruptive no matter how well I plan or use management techniques. I am having trouble understanding what more I can do." Another candidate says, "I am not sure what to do with a student who blatantly disregards what you ask them to do." In an individual interview a female English candidate explains that looking forward to her first year of teaching she feels least prepared for and most stressed about managing disruptive students. She says, "I get stressed out when I know that a tough class is coming in. It is like what am I going to do to keep them settled and it seems like I will never be able to no matter what."

It is no surprise that classroom management concerns rank high as a cause of stress for teacher candidates. The question remains, how can the IHE help alleviate this stress? Specific to the property of problems with no foreseeable solution candidates want more classroom management preparation and they want it earlier in the year-long internship. They also maintain that classroom management issues are inevitable and that alleviating stress associated with management issues comes with time and practice, and that there is only so much that the IHE can do to help. In the words of one candidate, "I think we need to talk about classroom management earlier in the year. It is ok to talk about it when the problems arise but if we talk about it before the problems occur we can be more proactive." Another said, "The more we address classroom management problems the better and the less stressed we will

be.” And finally, “It helps to just vent and to bounce ideas off each other.”

Student vs. teacher role confusion. Student versus teacher role confusion is another property that emerged in the classroom management category. Teacher candidates are often caught in the dichotomy of student versus teacher. Because the candidates do not yet view themselves as teacher they have difficulty asserting themselves in the role especially in regard to classroom management. Ten of the 12 candidates were 25 years or younger. Viewing self as teacher because of their proximity in age to the high school students they were teaching emerged as an area of stress specific to classroom management. As one candidate puts it, “Working with students only six years younger than myself appeared to be challenging at first. I am still trying to find a management style I like. This causes me anxiety.” Another states, “I have not had a lot of experience and I don’t really have the confidence to do it. I am kind of in limbo because I am an adult but part of me thinks who am I to say ‘do this or do that’ when I am only a couple years out of that stage myself. Also my size is an issue. I am only 5’9”.” One candidate is unsure of his role as a teacher and specifically has difficulty with how strict he should be. He says, “I am never sure if I am too hard on them or too easy.”

Candidates consistently made one suggestion for how the IHE could help alleviate stress associated with teacher versus student role confusion. They wanted more clarification in writing from the IHE on what the candidate should be doing in the classroom, especially in the fall semester. One candidate says, “I was never really sure what I supposed to be doing and my mentor did not know either. I needed something to hand to her that said I was supposed to do this and that. Then I would not have felt so lost.” Although the PDS handbook did specify roles of both mentor and candidate, and these roles were discussed at orientation meetings, it was evident that even more clarification and emphasis was needed.

Stressor # 2 Mentor Teacher: “Who will be my mentor?” and “Who am I?”

All teacher candidates expressed feeling stressed about their mentor teacher relationship at some point in the year-long internship. Two properties of the mentor teacher category presented in the data are concern with being paired with a mentor earlier in the year and finding one’s place in someone else’s classroom. Candidates seemed to ask two questions related to these properties (1) who will be my mentor (2) who am I?

Mentor pairings. The PDS partnership used for this study chose to have the teacher candidates rotate among various mentor teachers prior to making candidate mentor pairings. This was done to ensure that the candidates observed a variety of teachers with a variety of styles in a variety of content areas, and to ensure that the best matches were made. Pairings were confirmed in early October. This delay caused a significant amount of stress for the candidates. Comments from candidates included,

- “I’m just anxious about meeting with my mentor teachers and finding out who they are. This is frustrating.”
- “There was some stress about not knowing. Like where are we going and what are we supposed to be doing.”
- “My friends in other cohorts met their mentors right away. I did not like having to wait.”

There was overwhelming consensus that being paired with mentors immediately upon being placed in the PDS sites was important to the teacher candidates. The theme of not knowing was pervasive in the data and all 12 candidates iterated that they wanted to be paired earlier with their mentors, and that this change to the program would greatly reduce their stress. The decision was made by the PDS steering committee in late April to make this change in the next academic year.

Finding one's role. Teacher candidates expressed considerable concern about finding their role in their mentor teacher's classroom. Mahlios, Engstrom, Soroka & Shaw (2008) examine role negotiation and its importance to the beginning teachers' teacher education program and found that the student teachers' role in the school environment is important to "not just developing competence but contributing to improved school practice" (p. 75). One candidate spoke very candidly about his often tenuous relationship with his mentor and said,

I think that fundamentally she and I differ on our educational philosophies and approaches to teaching. I overlooked that and said it was no big deal. But some of the things she did in the classroom I knew I could not do like yelling or calling out a student. I am more about proximity control or talking to a student after class. When I have my own classroom I can do things differently but when I am in someone else's room I am not sure what I can do.

Many candidates spoke about not knowing what to do in the classroom early in the experience, attributing this to not wanting to overstep the boundary of "just being an intern." One candidate's statement was typical.

Once placed with my mentors I found it difficult to know what I was supposed to do in the classroom. I felt like I couldn't really do anything, yet I felt silly just being in the room observing. The classroom climate had already been set and my entering it later must have at least temporarily disrupted it.

Several more echoed this sentiment and said,

- "Working in someone else's system is hard. I wish I had a mentor teacher that would support my "reformish" curriculum needs."
- "Living in someone else's room is tough. And once you get used to that mentor's room you need to change placements and start all over in another mentor's room. It is like you never really feel at home anywhere."
- "My mentor never really introduced me so the kids think I am a sub. I am not really sure who I really am to them."

Similar to the data on how the IHE could help alleviate stress associated with this student versus teacher role confusion, candidates expressed specific thoughts on how the IHE could help the candidates feel more "at home" in the mentor's room. These suggestions included more clarification in writing from the IHE on what the candidate's role should be in the fall semester, suggestions for ways the mentor could allow "space" for the candidate in the classroom, and better methods of introducing the candidate to the students. One candidate said, "I need to know where to put my stuff and I would really like to have been introduced as a teacher not as a student teacher."

Stressor #3 Getting a Job: "Where will this take me?"

The ultimate goal for most, if not all, teacher candidates is to become employed as a full time teacher. Thus, it is no surprise that there is considerable stress in regard to getting a job. Early in the fall semester the IHE liaison began to talk to the candidates about where they want to teach, where they plan to interview, and building their resumes. This discussion continued through the year and into the spring seminar sessions. Data yielded significant evidence that getting a job was a stressful prospect for all candidates in the study. Two properties emerged early in data collection (1) current financial concerns and (2) the job seeking process.

Current financial concerns. Many of the candidates cited financial problems as causing a great deal of stress. Because the year-long internship is a full-time program, candidates are not able to hold other jobs, therefore have little to no income. To that end, finding a job immediately upon graduation is a stressful and pressing issue. One candidate said, "This is the first time since 9th grade that I have no job. With travelling to and from school every day and the increasing price of gas, I am living off my savings." He continues to say, "My greatest challenge is finding a job." Another candidate said, "I am always conscious of my checkbook." And another said, "Having no money is stressful. Not being able to work and trying to plan a wedding is tough."

Job seeking process. All candidates in the cohort were actively seeking teaching jobs in teaching during the 2007/2008 academic year. The job seeking process caused considerable stress. Specifically noted by the candidates were the layers involved in the job search process. For example, candidates expressed concern with where to apply, how to build a resume, how to successfully interview, how best to ask for and to collect recommendation forms, and the process of waiting to hear from school systems. In the words of one candidate, "Really the thing that is causing me the most stress right now is waiting to hear back from school systems." Another said, "Mr. Smith's recommendation is really holding up the job process for me. I cannot get an interview with the county until he sends in his letter. This is so stressful."

The primary suggestion from candidates on how to make the job search process less stressful was for the IHE to provide information about the job search process more often in the year-long internship. Specifically, candidates wanted more guidance about how to write a resume, how to negotiate the recommendation form process, and how to apply to different school systems. All candidates also clearly understood that getting a job is stressful whether you are a beginning teacher or a veteran and that the stress is inevitable and ultimately resolves itself.

Stressor #4 Knowledge of Content: "What do I know?"

There was consensus among teacher candidates that knowledge of content caused significant stress during the year-long experience. All participants in the study noted feelings of not fully knowing their content and feeling stressed about this. Early on in the study it became apparent that all the candidates experienced some degree of stress related to content knowledge. On the pre-internship questionnaire six candidates indicated that knowing their content fully was causing them significant stress as they entered their internship. As data collection proceeded two properties emerged (1) knowing more than the students and (2) the ability to translate the content through lesson plans.

Knowing more than the students. As one candidate said, "I feel some stress that I don't know as much as I need to know to teach History courses. I just don't want the students to know more than I do about

the subject.” Similar concerns are expressed by another candidate who said, “I feel as though with my major I received the basics of several majors and therefore don’t feel as though I have a huge wealth of knowledge in any of them. Therefore if a student asked a question that I didn’t know I think I would become frustrated.” Conversation during the focus group echoed these sentiments. One candidate said, “for me the most stressful part of the year was mastering my content. I was never really sure if I knew my stuff and it was hard to dig back into what I had learned in my content classes.” Another agreed, “In the high school it was stressful because I was trying to learn the content. At that point I felt unprepared.” Another said, “no matter how well I believe I know a subject there is always uncertainty when teaching.”

Translating the content through lesson plans. Feeling confident in their ability to translate knowledge of content through lesson plans to the students was the second property that emerged in regard to content knowledge. Even when a candidate felt confident in knowing their content, they still expressed stress associated with effectively communicating this knowledge via effective lesson planning. One candidate said, “My challenge is feeling confident in communicating the subject to the students through well developed lessons. I am not sure I feel so good about this.” In the focus group interview a male social studies teacher said, “The pace of the high school is intense. I have to learn along with my students and it is difficult to make sure I am getting them all the information they need in my lesson plans.”

Stressor #5 Portfolio Process: “Why must we do this?”

The PDS cohort in this study had a graduation portfolio requirement. The portfolio construction process began early in their Junior year and continued through the year-long internship. Based on the 10 INTASC principles, the portfolios were submitted in May in a hard copy binder format. Portfolios were scored using an INTASC based rubric by teams of IHE and PDS school representatives at a portfolio scoring workshop. Portfolios that did not pass according to the rubric were returned to the candidates to be revised and resubmitted.

The portfolio process is tedious and causes a great deal of stress for the teacher candidates. All candidates expressed some degree of stress about the process. In the words of one English candidate during the focus group, “Why do we have to do this? It is so much work and we do not use them for interviews. I mean I guess I understand but it does cause so much stress.” A Social Studies candidate expressed concern that not only did he have to construct an Education portfolio but he also had to do a Social Studies content portfolio. “We shouldn’t have to do it in Social Studies too” he said. Stress regarding the portfolio was significant. At the same time, candidates understood and accepted that it was a graduation requirement that was meaningful and important. No suggestions were made for ways to reduce stress in this area.

Conclusion

While there is much examination still to be done in relation to PDS teacher candidate stress and ways to alleviate stress this study took steps to begin to examine causes of stress for secondary PDS teacher candidates during the year-long internship and asked for the teacher candidates’ perceptions of ways the IHE can alleviate their stress. Understanding, from the teacher candidate perspective, what causes stress and how the IHE can help has been largely ignored in the literature. If we can begin to explore the phenomenon of stress and identify its causes we can make progress in ways to improve

and advance our teacher education programs. This study, albeit small, offers us a beginning to this endeavor.

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